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A Note on the Buddha Image Depicted as the Ninth Avatāra of Viṣṇu

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The Cālukya king Bhīmadeva of Gujarat ruled from 1022 to 1064 CE. The great stepwell in Patan, the capital, was probably completed after his death by his queen Udayamati by 1090 CE (hence called Rānī kī Vāv). Within a few centuries, a tsunami-like great flood from the nearby river completely filled the stepwell with sand and water. Desiltment and reconstruction started only in 1986 and was completed by 1990 (see Kirit Mankodiv 1991, p. 234).

The Queen's Stepwell has on its walls both Vaiṣṇava and Śaiva sculptures, but no Jaina, and only a single Buddhist sculpture. It is a most unusual four-armed standing Buddha image depicted as the ninth *avatāra* of Viṣṇu, in a *daśāvatāra* panel, placed between the images of Balarāma (eighth) and Kalki (tenth).

The Pali canon of the fifth/fourth centuries BCE bears witness to the then rising conflict between the Vedic *brāhmaṇas* and the anti-Vedic *śramaṇas*, notably the ascetic followers of Gautama the Buddha (see Jaini 1970). But we will never know what catastrophic events in the Aśokan or the Śuṅga period that might have led Patañjali, in his *Vyākaraṇa-mahābhāṣya* [on Kātyāyana's *Vārttikas* on Pāṇini's *sūtras*] to give the compound "*śramaṇa-brāhmaṇa*" as an example of "eternal hostility" similar to that between a crow and an owl:

*yeṣāṃ virodhaḥ śāśvatikas teṣāṃ dvandva ekavacanam eva /
śramaṇabrāhmaṇam/ kākolūkam / śvaśrgālam iti / [Mahābhāṣya 2.4.1].*

At a later time the *Manusmṛti* will condemn a reviler of the Vedas as a "nihilist" : *nāstiko vedanindakaḥ* [1.11d].

The *avatāra*ization of the Buddha, regardless of this alleged "eternal" opposition between the *śramaṇa* and *brāhmaṇa*, appears to be an extraordinary phenomenon, appearing in the *Mahābhārata* and the Purāṇas in the "*daśāvatāra*" narratives. Most of these have been cited and studied by Luis Gonzalez-Reimann (2002: 171-191).

The popularity of the Buddhist legends, notably among the affluent merchant castes, the promoters of the great art and architecture at Sanchi, Ajanta, Amaravati, and so forth, could have been a major factor. This might have induced the Purāṇic authors to draw the Buddha within their *bhakti* movement by according him the high status of an *avatāra* of the Kali-yuga (dating started in 3102 BCE, comparable to the Jewish date 3760 BCE).

Lord Viṣṇu will, in this Yuga, adopt a new strategy of appearing in the guise (*māyāvin*) of the Buddha and achieve the destruction of the demonic forces (a task required of an *avatāra*) by his teachings against the performances of Vedic sacrifices, and so forth.

Slowly but surely a more positive view developed which saw the Buddha's teachings opposed only to the excessive violence in rituals of animal sacrifice. This is seen first in the *Gītagovinda* of Jayadeva (c. 1200):

nindasi yajñavidher iha śrutijātaṃ /
sadayahṛdaya darśitapaśughātaṃ /
*Keśava! dhṛta **Buddhaśarīra**, jaya Jagadīśa Hare //* (11)

Tulsidas follows Jayadeva in his *Vinayapatrikā* (Daśāvatāra #52):

prabala pākhaṇḍa mahāmaṇḍalākula dekhi /
nindyakṛt akhila-makha-karmajālam /
śuddhabodhaika-ghanajñāna-guṇadhāma /
*aba **Buddha avatāra** vande kṛpālam //*

The sculptor at the stepwell had no doubt models of the Gupta period for his *avatāra* images. The stepwell *avatāras* have four arms, and the four emblems of Viṣṇu: the *śaṅkha* (conch), *cakra* (wheel) *gadā* (mace) and *padma* (lotus). The first three are held by three arms, while the lotus, being a sign of transcendence, is simply carved on the palm of the open right hand, shown in the *varada* (boon-bestowing) *mudrā*.

An exception to this rule is the image of the Vāmana (dwarf) *avatāra*. He is shown as a *baṭu* (a young student), clad in a loincloth (*kaupīna*) as worn by Brahmanical ascetics, and a band of *rudrākṣa* seeds around his arms and neck. He is shown with only two arms. In the left he holds a *chatra* (umbrella, a novel idea of our sculptor?). The open palm of his right hand shows a carved flower (*padma*), the only emblem of Viṣṇu. This is because Vāmana will soon emerge with four arms and the emblems as Trivikrama, his two feet covering both heaven and earth, as he pushes down the mighty demon Bali to the *pātāla*.

Failing to find a model for the Buddha-*avatāra*, it seems our sculptor hit upon the idea of using certain features of his Vāmana image. The Buddha is given four arms, but similar to Vāmana, he is also denied the three emblems, viz. the weapons of Viṣṇu, unsuitable for an ascetic. Like the *baṭu*, the Buddha is also adorned with the *rudrākṣa* bands and a necklace as well, making him appear like a Śaivaite ascetic. While the *kaupīna* (loincloth) is a correct attire for a *baṭu*, it is improper for a Buddha. Yet, our sculptor has chosen to show the Buddha gird in a *kaupīna*, a practice unknown among the Buddhist monks, who wear a large towel-size cloth called *antaravāsaka*. It is also most unseemly to reveal this *kaupīna* under the full robe that is drawn across and under the left shoulder and reaches below his knees, similar in manner of the Buddha images of the Gupta period. The lower portion of the robe appears like a long and thick *Vaijayantī-mālā*, the garland of flowers, common to the images of Viṣṇu and the *avatāras*. But a close look reveals that here it is made of cloth with designs of interwoven lines.

This brings us to the mysterious objects, substitutes for *śaṅkha*, *cakra*, and *gadā*, that are placed by our sculptor in the hands of the Buddha image.

Certain *avatāras* are recognized by a specific weapon: Paraśurāma by his axe (*paraśu*) and Balarāma by his plough (*hala*), both substitutes for *gadā*. To make the Buddha recognizable in this manner, the sculptor needs to find objects that might reveal his teachings of compassion and charity attributed to him. We learn from the Tibetan historian Tārānātha that Śāntideva, the celebrated author of the *Bodhicaryāvatāra* was born a prince of Saurāshtra around 850 CE (see Bendall 1957, p. iii). If this be the case, then it is quite likely that some affluent lay followers of Mahayana Buddhism in Gujarat could have provided guidance in such matters to our sculptor.

The most striking object in this figure is the large lotus flower held upright by the Buddha's upper left arm, his fingers gripping at the neck of its thick stem. Since a *padma* (lotus) is already carved on the open palm, this lotus is certainly not held as an emblem. Moreover, strangely, this lotus is not in full bloom, but a closed bud! I venture to suggest that here the sculptor is trying to show a Buddhist scripture that bears the name of a "lotus", and that is obviously the *Saddharma-Puṇḍarīka-sūtra*, known to us as The *Lotus-sūtra*!

The object in the upper right hand is not easily recognized. But it looks like a thin palm-leaf manuscript, held vertically by the Buddha. It is reminiscent of the Mathura image of the Jaina goddess "Sarasvati," holding a rather thick manuscript vertically, close to her chest, by her left hand, and a small flower in her raised left palm (head and shoulder missing). It could be any popular Mahayana text, but possibly a smaller version of the *Prajñāpāramitā-sūtra*.

The next most puzzling object is a long, but less wide, piece of cloth that is held by the Buddha's lower left hand, and it is wrapped around, going behind the back, its end tied to the front with a large knot, held by his fingers.

It was customary (and it still is) to honor wealthy lay Jains who have led large groups of devotees and ascetics (*yātrā*) to the sacred pilgrimage places (like Palitana in Saurashtra) with large garlands of flowers, and/or for their charitable works cover their shoulders in public with richly colored shawls. The Buddha's legendary stories of charity (*dāna-pāramitā*) were also probably known to the public, and it was thought proper to acknowledge it by this long piece of cloth, cut from the same fabric that was used for his robe (and the loincloth).

It should be noted that none of these three novel objects make the Buddha look like a "*māyāvin*" *avatāra* of the Purāṇas, working under a guise to teach a false doctrine. The only feature that could possibly suggest it is the way our sculptor has chosen deliberately (so it seems) to show him, conspicuously, setting to walk with his left foot out.

This is in contrast to other *avatāras*, e.g. Paraśurāma and Balarāma, who are shown turning their right foot to the right side. It looks as if in this subtle way the sculptor is showing the Buddha on a "*vāma-mārga*" (left-path), the traditional name for a wrong direction that a misguided person may take and also lead others to it.

This indeed is a unique image, without a precedent or an imitation. It is possible that because of the sudden loss of the stepwell for centuries, the four-armed Buddha image remained unseen and was not copied elsewhere. But the Buddha-*avatāra* was not forgotten. At the Jagannātha Puri temple in Orissa, among the *daśāvatāra* images appearing on the outer walls, the Buddha is shown (as in any Buddhist temple) in a seated meditative posture with both his hands held on his lap. Only a tall lotus (*padma*) shown on his left suggests that he is an *avatāra* of Viṣṇu.

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Figure 1: The four-armed Buddha in the Queen's Stepwell, photo courtesy of Srinivas Reddy.

Figure 2: Vāmana-*avatāra* in the Queen's Stepwell, photo courtesy of Srinivas Reddy.

Figure 3: Goddess Sarasvati, figure 12, Uttar Pradesh, Mathura, Kankali Tila 132 [?], cat. 55, in Pal 1994.

Figure 4: Buddha, figure 28, outer wall of the main deula, Lord Jagannatha temple, Puri, Orissa, in Dash 2008.

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PLATE 2

Fig. 3: Goddess Sarasvati, figure 12, Uttar Pradesh, Mathura, Kankali Tila 132 [?], cat. 55, in Pal 1994.



Fig. 4: Buddha, “figure 28, outer wall of the main deula, Lord Jagannatha temple, Puri, Orissa,” in Dash 2008.

